

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE BLOGGERS ROUNDTABLE WITH CHAPLAIN (LIEUTENANT COLONEL)
CARLETON BIRCH, OFFICE OF THE CHIEF OF CHAPLAINS, VIA TELECONFERENCE TIME: 12:00
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LINDY KYZER (Army Public Affairs): Thank you so much, everyone, for
joining us.

Thank you to Chaplain Lieutenant Colonel Carleton Birch, he's with the
Office of the Chief of Chaplains. He's going to be discussing the Strong Bonds
program, telling you a little bit more about it, and then also taking your
questions. I'll turn it over to the chaplain. Thank you so much.

LT. COL. BIRCH: Hi, everybody. I'm glad to be here and talk to you
about the Army Chaplain Strong Bonds program.

We started the program back in 1999. It was just a brigade-level
program really at that time that was collaborative with the installation and the
MEDCOM folks to provide a -- try to provide a program that met the needs of
relationship building for families and couples in their unit. Through a series
of events it got briefed up at the Army level, and in a very short time turned
into an all-Army type program that has grown since then to a very large program.
Currently, over 100,000 soldiers and members have participated in over 2,500
Strong Bonds events throughout the active Army, the Army Reserve and the
National Guard.

We are continuing to expand the program. A couple of things that are
coming up I would like to tell you about is we've recently validated
requirements for \$30 million in the Army budget. So we're looking at moving
that program, the bulk of the program, into the base budget, which is good news
for us. Currently, a lot of it is located in the supplemental.

It's really an umbrella of programs that includes nine different
programs under it, and it's managed separately by the active Army, the Army
Reserve and the National Guard, and also the Air Guard is in there as well.
These programs are all relationship-enhancing skills- based programs that are
designed to increase relationship and the length of the relationship and the
quality of the relationship across the board.

Now, we've had studies done and everybody comes off on these things and
says, ah, we had a great time. But right now, NIH, National Institutes of
Health, is doing a five-year longitudinal study to evaluate the long-term
effectiveness of Strong Bonds, and they're currently in their second evaluative
year, and we're looking forward to sometime in the spring, we hope, for their

first written peer- based, peer-reviewed article to come out, and we think it's going to be positive.

At this time, I guess I'll take your questions.

MS. KYZER: Okay. Christian, did you have a question?

Q I did.

Thanks a lot, Lieutenant Colonel Birch. This is Christian Lowe from Military.com.

You know, I'm -- just the fact that this interview came up is interesting because years ago I did an article for my old paper, Marine Corps Times, about how to deal with combat stress and the stress of deployment, and dealing with the things and events that soldiers and Marines see when they go to combat and how to deal with them when they come back. And so this sort of fits with those overall programs that were started years ago.

And I'm wondering if you can give any kind of results for your efforts. In other words, you know, how have the rates of divorce and breakups and spousal or, you know, abuse of girlfriends or boyfriends and that sort of thing gone down or up, or what? Have you seen any net effect of your program?

LT. COL. BIRCH: Yeah, Christian, that's a great question. And that is what the NIH study is looking at. Being an outside study, it's looking at over 500 families from -- right now I think the families included in the study were originally from Fort Campbell and Fort Benning, Georgia.

And they're following those families over a five-year period to see if it has an effect on divorce rates, things like spouse and child abuse, reenlistment rates and those type of things. If going to a weekend marriage-enhancing event has a long-term effect on those types of things, I think it'll be news that a lot of people will be interested in.

Q Yeah, but isn't the point of these weekends to give those couples tools to deal with the things that come up -- you know, the tension that comes up in a relationship during deployment and, you know, all that -- the different lifestyles and all that kind of stuff that's just sort of part of being a soldier or a Marine or an airman or whatever? Don't -- aren't they given tools to deal with that? And so you're not really looking specifically at the effect of that one seminar; you're looking at the effect of what you arm them with afterwards, right? And I would assume that you have your own internal analysis, you know, other than the NIH study.

LT. COL. BIRCH: Yeah, we've done -- we did some initial studies and found some promising effects. Give me a sec and I can quote you a couple of things from that, but --

Q I'll stand by. Don't worry.

LT. COL. BIRCH: Sure.

Initial studies showed that 90 percent of the couples were satisfied or very satisfied with the relationship skill-building component of the -- of -- and I say "weekend," but more often than not these are also held during the weeks -- weekday as well --

Q Okay. LT. COL. BIRCH: -- especially when it comes to pre-deployment and redeployment. And that's where we've seen the explosiveness in the growth of the program, as -- of commanders have started to use this as part of their R4 Gen process in both pre-deployment and post-deployment. And I'll talk a little bit more about that in a second because we've had to adjust because of that.

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Sixty-seven percent showed an increased marriage quality from start to end of the program. And that actually went up to 75 percent 30 days after the program ended. But like any skills-based approach -- like, say a soldier learns to fire their weapon and they learn certain tools for accuracy in firing their weapon -- they have to practice those skills in order to keep them current. And so -- and that's why -- (audio break) -- difficult to measure a long-term effectiveness of a one-time skills-building event.

But we're hopeful that it has a positive impact. And now we're seeing couples and families return for multiple engagements as commanders use it for pre-deployment and post-deployment.

Let me go ahead and mention that, too. We -- (audio break) -- response to requests from the field, we developed pre- and post-deployment versions of the program -- (audio break) -- lot of the programs that are under the umbrella are out-of-the-box packages that have already been shown to increase relationship effectiveness across time. They've been around for a while. They've been in the marriage training community. And that's why we use them.

But there really wasn't any out-of-the-box program that we found that was suitable for military families to use for pre- and post-deployment. I mean, the goals for pre-deployment are somewhat different. You know, your goal for pre-deployment is to separate well.

Q Right.

LT. COL. BIRCH: The goal for redeployment is to get back together --

Q Right.

LT. COL. BIRCH: -- and to rebuild those relationships and readjust to those roles and responsibilities and those type of things that the family's adjusted to while you've been gone.

So -- and so we had to create curriculum for that. And so folks are just starting to use that -- (audio break) -- some evaluation on that in the future as well. MS. KYZER: Okay. And Lauren with -- (affiliation inaudible) -- did you have a question?

Q No, not right now.

MS. KYZER: Okay. Any other questions out there?

Q I can keep asking, Lindy.

MS. KYZER: Keep going.

Q All right. You mentioned earlier, in one of your earlier answers, that people were -- that you have to practice those skills that you learn at these retreats. Can you just give a couple of examples of what that would mean? Like, if I'm writing a story and trying to tell a soldier who's never heard of this, what are some of the things he's going to learn?

LT. COL. BIRCH: Yeah, that's a great question. A lot of it depends on the program that they're using. But let's use the example of PREP, Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program for couples. In that, part of the skills base is to use "I" messages when you talk about feelings to -- (audio break) -- they use a tool called "the floor." When one person has the floor, they get to give their message.

We give them a card that tells them "I" messages they can use. It gives them hints of how to say things. And then the other person on their version of the floor as the listener practices active listening and on that card has active listening skills that they can use.

Q Did you say "I" as in the letter I or "eye" as in your eyeball?

LT. COL. BIRCH: "I" as in the letter I, as in "me, myself and I."

Q Okay.

LT. COL. BIRCH: "I" messages meaning -- like, instead of saying -- instead of saying, "You always leave your clothes lying around all over the floor. I'm tired of picking them up."

Q Okay.

LT. COL. BIRCH: You may say -- and instead, a(n) "I" message would be "I get frustrated when you leave your clothes lying around on the floor."

Q Okay.

LT. COL. BIRCH: That would be an example of an "I" message. One of them would be -- might be egging on a fight and the other one would be -- would be just helping to communicate in a responsible way.

Q Okay. And you said that commanders are increasingly using this as part of their pre- and post-deployment sort of programs. What do you mean by that? Are they telling soldiers to go to these?

LT. COL. BIRCH: Well, part of Deployment Cycle Support -- are you familiar with Deployment Cycle Support?

Q A little bit.

LT. COL. BIRCH: It's a G-1 thing that tells kind of a baseline of some of the things that soldiers need to have before they deploy and when they come back and before they come back. And there's things in there also for families. And one of the things is to provide an opportunity for marriage relationship building, both before they go and when they come back. It doesn't say -- unlike

some of the other things in Deployment Cycle Support, it doesn't say every soldier or every married soldier has to -- has to use it, has to go through that program. It just says to provide an opportunity. So -- and so that's what Strong Bonds helps do for them.

I would be really remiss to leave out the singles portion of Strong Bonds. We also have a singles component. And a lot of commanders are using that. It's a -- it's a product called -- it's gone by a lot of different names. One is called "No Jerks" or "How Not to Marry a Jerk." But it's really a relationship skills program for singles. And commanders are using that as well.

Q And what does -- what does that help? I mean, is that for the guy that has no girlfriend or anything and comes home to an empty house or --

LT. COL. BIRCH: Well, we believe that most soldiers have relationships and a lot of soldiers have relationships with folks of the opposite sex.

So it teaches them healthy relationship skills, for those who aren't married.

Q And how much -- you're a chaplain, so how much religion is injected into this program? How much is it a part and woven into the skills and that sort of thing?

LT. COL. BIRCH: That's a really great question. Because we use out-of-the-box programs that at their base are not religious, the curriculum -- most of the curriculum itself is not religious at all. However, because chaplains teach it, we bring who we are to the instructor, to the front. And we don't -- we don't apologize for being chaplains or for being pro-marriage or pro-relationship.

And then there is room in the program for curriculum that is -- that the commander wants to do in addition to these out-of-the-box programs. So in other words, they may link up with -- link up with preventive medicine, and do some things with them, do some risk- assessment type things for their families. They may link up with Army Community Services, and do some things with families that they have to offer on these -- on these overnight off-sites.

But there also may be Christian curriculums for those who are interested in going to that. And we just tell our chaplains to make sure they advertise it as a curriculum -- as a truth-in-advertisement so that -- and make it an option for those couples who -- who don't have that.

Q And are some of these skills -- so you're saying like, okay, so I'm a soldier, I'm about to deploy, I go to one of these weekend events. I have several different lectures or seminars to choose from, to go to? Is that what you're saying?

LT. COL. BIRCH: Well, it could work out that way. It all depends on how they set it up. I mean, normally, the events aren't that large, but sometimes they are. Some units are making very large events, and they'll take, you know, 80 to 100 couples or more at a time. And so they could be set up that way, with a choice, with different instructors.

But more often than not, it's a little bit smaller than that, 10 to 20 -- or about 20 couples. And then they're all together, one program. Q Okay. And then, so the instructors that are teaching these out-of-the-box

skills things, like the "I" speech and all that kind of stuff, are they chaplains that are teaching it? Or do you have contractors doing it?

How does that -- who's actually standing up there talking to these guys?

LT. COL. BIRCH: Almost all the time, it chaplains.

Q Okay.

LT. COL. BIRCH: And a lot of that's related because it's a chaplain-based program. We developed it. And secondly, has to do with public law.

Q Okay.

LT. COL. BIRCH: Title 10 was changed a few years ago to -- we were having problems with the program because lawyers and those who deal with the money said there was a restriction on spending tax dollars in the military on Army families for these type of events, paying for their hotel --

Q Because of the religious thing?

LT. COL. BIRCH: -- and for the child care, specifically, and for some of the meals.

Q Okay.

LT. COL. BIRCH: So that that was a real challenge. And so public law was actually amended. I can read to you what it says. Under Title 10, Section 1789, it says: "The secretary of a military department may provide support services described in subsection (b) to support chaplain-led programs to assist members of the armed forces on active duty and their immediate family members, and members of the reserve components in an active status and their immediate family members, in building and maintaining a strong family structure.

Q Okay.

LT. COL. BIRCH: So the chaplain-led portion is pretty specific, and that's why we keep Strong Bonds as a chaplain-led program.

MS. KYZER: I think we might have had someone else join on the line. So is there anyone else on the line who hasn't asked a question who has a question now? Q Actually, this is Lauren (sp) from AFES.

MS. KYZER: Go ahead.

Q And we have just one question. Are these programs available on every installation, or is this something that the soldier and their family has to travel to to participate in?

LT. COL. BIRCH: Yes. (Laughs.)

Q Yes? (Laughs.)

LT. COL. BIRCH: As I said, it's a large program. It depends on the family. If it's a Guard family, they normally have to travel. If it's a Reserve family, sometimes they have to fly to the event, and they have to cut orders for the soldier and the family members to go to the event, because the

Army Reserve is structured differently. Active component is generally done in relationship with the installation, but it's commander-initiated. So the commander requests the funding for the Strong Bonds program, and usually at a brigade level, would be a brigade commander, usually.

Q Excellent. Thank you.

LT. KYZER: Any other questions?

Q Lindy, the only follow-up question I have is, sir, what is your job title and your denomination?

LT. COL. BIRCH: Sure. My job title is strategic communications for the Army Chief of Chaplains.

And my endorsing agency for the Army is the Baptist General Conference.

Q So strategic communications -- are you the director of strategic communications for the Chaplain Corps?

LT. COL. BIRCH: Yeah, that's a great title.

(Cross talk.)

Directorate of one.

Q All right, I like that. Okay, all right. (Laughs.)

Q (Inaudible.) I rang in late. Sorry.

MS. KYZER: No problem.

Q And because of that, I'm maybe asking a redundant question.

MS. KYZER: That's fine.

Q This program is geared toward married couples and single soldiers. Are engaged soldiers included as a couple?

LT. COL. BIRCH: Yeah, engaged couples can go, absolutely. Normally though chaplains will do an individualized program, pre-marital program for soldiers and their fiancées wanting to get married. So that's something we normally do.

Q Well, yeah, right. But over and above pre-marital counseling, I guess, is what you would call it. You know, would funding be available as a married couple? Or would you have to go as a single?

LT. COL. BIRCH: That question has come up before. And the commander that's sponsoring the event would have to make that decision. If I'm in charge of it, I'm going to say, yes, they can go to the -- if they're an engaged couple, they can go to the couples program.

But there's a couples program, a family program, which would include the children, as part of the curriculum. And then there's a singles program as the third part, third program. And then the fourth would be the pre-and-

post-deployment. Those are the four major, I think, you'd say, target audiences in the program.

Q Okay.

LT. COL. BIRCH: Strong Bonds -- consider Strong Bonds as an umbrella of programs.

Q Okay, I may have misunderstood you. But I thought I heard you say that this is open to Reserve soldiers on active duty.

LT. COL. BIRCH: Yeah, Reserve and National Guard, they're very much using the program.

Q Right, but do they have to be on active duty? Or can they be just actively, you know, serving in the Reserve on their weekends? Or do they have to be on deployment?

LT. COL. BIRCH: That's a question that they're wrestling with. What I was -- what you heard was the public law that I was reading that talks about -- Section 1789 and in Title 10. And so you know, when they're on a reserve weekend, they are on active duty.

Q True, but that's --

LT. COL. BIRCH: They might not be under Title 10 at that point. But so they do get funding, through the Guard and through the reserve components, for the Strong Bonds program.

In the National Guard, it's tied in with the Yellow Ribbon program.

Q Right. So the Strong Bonds program could be considered being -- because you have to cut orders, it would be considered being on active duty. Okay.

LT. COL. BIRCH: Yeah. I mean, they're -- yes. They have this issue of paying for family members and soldiers to go. You know, the reserve components are normally pretty geographically separated from one another, so it makes it a challenge.

On our website, on the Strong Bonds website, you can see -- there's a link that says "Find an event near you." And so that's one way that we've used to try to help that. So people can go to open slots if there's an event going on near their location as well.

Q Okay. Thank you.

MS. KYZER: Any other questions?

Okay. We're right at 30 minutes. We'll go ahead and close out.

Thank you so much, Chaplain Birch, for your time. Do you have any closing remarks or anything we didn't touch on that you think folks should be aware of?

LT. COL. BIRCH: No; this is my first Bloggers Roundtable, and as a member of the Chaplain Corps, I know there's lots of other topics. (We'd ?) love

to be able to talk in the future about the chaplaincy, who we are, what we do; and look forward to a continued relationship.

And as always, you can always contact me with specific questions.

MS. KYZER: Okay, great. Thanks so much, sir.

Thank you, everyone who joined us on the line. I'll send out the transcript and have that available to you hopefully some time tomorrow. Thank you again for participating.

END.